

Key Principles for Crafting Interventions for English Language Learners (ELLs)

Principle 1: Second language input must be made comprehensible for proficiency to develop.

Without contextualizing and presenting language with physical or visual references, the ELL student may hear what is presented in the non-native language as incomprehensible noise. Interventions in English should always be accompanied by a visual or physical context, such as graphic representations, pictures, physical models or manipulatives to make sense of the words or text.

Principle 2: A second language develops more easily when learners are actively engaged in authentic use of the language.

Interventions must have authentic communication at their base. This means that ELLs need to listen to understand, say things they want to say, read to gather information and write about things they want to write about; therefore, classroom tasks require listening for understanding, oral explanations to others, reading to collect information and writing to inform others.

Principle 3: Because of common underlying proficiency, concepts and structures that are learned in one language have the potential to transfer to the other language that the student is learning.

An ELL's first language should be used as a resource for developing the second language, as well as for learning new concepts, as it facilitates learning in the second language. If concepts have been established in the first language, they do not need to be re-taught in the second language. Additionally, past experiences must be used to scaffold comprehension by building connections with existing knowledge and skills.

Principle 4: When you learn a second language in an additive bilingual context, you are more likely to reach high levels of proficiency in both languages than if you were learning the second language in a subtractive bilingual context. In the latter situation, not only is the native language likely to be sacrificed but the second language may not develop to an optimal level of proficiency.

In an additive bilingual situation, an individual adds proficiency in a new language without losing proficiency in the native language, whereas in a subtractive bilingual situation as the individual becomes proficient in the new language, proficiency in the native language diminishes (or worse is lost altogether). An ELL's loss of the native tongue in the course of acquiring English can have severe social, cognitive and academic consequences; consequently, interventions (or programming) should not be implemented that will cause ELLs to lose their first native language, identity, culture or will cut them off from their families or communities.

Principle 5: Second language acquisition occurs in predictable stages.

The stages of second language acquisition are generally defined as: preproduction, early production, speech emergence, intermediate fluency and fluency. An intervention is more likely to be effective if it corresponds with the particular stage of second language acquisition that the learner is passing through.

Principle 6: To succeed at school, ELLs must develop conversational fluency as well as academic fluency.

Academic language proficiency is quite different from conversational fluency. ELLs may sound proficient in English, but may still be lacking the language skills necessary in school. Interventions should help ELLs acquire discrete language skills that help them learn about language.

Principle 7: Some ELLs may take more than five years to develop a high enough level of academic proficiency to survive in a classroom where abstract concepts are taught in English.

Although many ELLs develop fluency in social English they may take up to nine years to catch up to native English speaking peers in academic English. ELLs must have repeated opportunities to use language in a variety of meaningful contexts. Unfortunately, most ELLs are not given long enough to develop the language skills they need to survive in an academic setting where English is the medium of instruction.

Adapted from "Special Education Considerations for English Language Learners," Hamayan, E., Marler, B., Sanchez-Lopez, C. & Damico, J.